

Stillman House
1305 East Washington Street
Brownsville
Cameron County
Texas

HABS No. TX-3285

HABS
TEX,
31-BROWN,
16-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D. C. 20243

STILLMAN HOUSE

HABS TEX, 31-BROWN, 16-

Location: 1305 East Washington Street, Brownsville, Cameron County, Texas.

Present Owner: City of Brownsville.

Present Occupant: The Brownsville Historical Association. (Kino Camarillo, the caretaker, lives in the original carriage house at rear.)

Present Use: Historic House Museum.

Significance: Stillman House, built in the 1850s, is one of the oldest residences in Brownsville. The house is said to have been the residence of Charles Stillman who owned and developed the original townsite of Brownsville. In the 1890s the house was occupied by Thomas Carson, agent for Stillman interests, and mayor of Brownsville from 1879-1892. This small-scale Greek Revival house has been preserved as a museum by the Brownsville Historical Association, the city of Brownsville, and the generosity of Stillman descendants.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: Stillman House was probably built in the 1850s. during restoration an inscription reading "John Richardson Curry 1850" was found under a panel molding on one of the doors.
2. Architect: None known. John Curry could have been the carpenter.
3. Original and subsequent owners: The Stillman House is located on lots 7 and 8 of Block 89 of the Original Townsite of Brownsville. References below to the title of these lots from the Cameron County Clerk's Office in Brownsville were traced by Sandra Merrill.

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| 1850 | Warranty Deed recorded December 26, 1850, in Vol. G, pp. 44-45. Sam A. Belden and Charles Stillman sold Lot 8 to Henry Miller, attorney for John Webb, for \$150. |
| 1850 | Deed recorded February 28, 1850, in Vol. A, pp. 557-558. Robert Kinsbury sold Lot 7 to Abram R. Mark and John N. Wentz. |
| 1852 | Deed recorded June 14, 1852, in Vol. E, pp. 346-348. Charles A. W. McDonnell and Anna McDonnell sold Lot 7 to Nicholas Channo. |
| 1852 | Confirmation of Deed recorded June 30, 1852, in Vol. E, pp. 376-377. E. Basse and R. H. Hord (E. Basse, agent) confirmed title of Henry Miller and John Webb to Lot 8. (Basse and Hord were lawyers for the Stillman interests.) |

- 1856 Warranty Deed recorded August 13, 1856, in Volume G, pages 55-56. E. Basse and R. H. Hord sold Lot 7 to Henry Miller for \$250.
- 1858 Deed recorded March 10, 1858, as Volume G, pages 325-328. Henry Miller and William Neale as executors for the Estate of John Webb (deceased) sold lots 7 and 8 to Richard King for \$4,500.
- 1858 Deed recorded March 12, 1858, in Volume G, pages 328-329. Richard King sold lots 7 and 8 to Henry Miller for \$4,500.
- 1858 Warranty Deed for Vendor's Lend recorded September 8, 1858, in Volume G, pages 378-379. Henry Miller sold lots 7 and 8 to Manuel Treviño whose family held the title to the house for the next one hundred years. Manuel Treviño paid \$4,300 for the property.
- 1958 Warranty Deed recorded January 8, 1958, in Volume 650, page 385, and following. Manuel Treviño individually and as attorney for Josefa Treviño sold lots 7 and 8 to Chauncey Stillman for \$50,000.
- 1962 Quit-claim Deed recorded December 27, 1962, in Volume 739, page 11 and following. The Brownsville Historical Association gave lots 7 and 8 to the City of Brownsville.
4. Builder, contractor, or supplier: Nothing is known except that John Richardson Curry might have been the carpenter for the building since his name appears on the door molding.
5. Original plan and construction: The Stillman House brochure, now out of print, stated that the house was built of locally made brick, and slate shingles brought from New England. The doors, windows, and exterior shutters are all original to the house.
6. Alterations and additions: The house was restored by the Brownsville Historical Association from 1957-1958, and into 1960 by the Brownsville architect Alex Woolridge, AIA, and the contracting firm of Sundell & Engates, at a cost of \$85,000. Work was carried out from directions of a New York architect, J. Sanford Shanley (an associate of Walter Knight Sturges), according to recent information from Shanley's former Brownsville agent, Gayle D. Wilhite, AIA. [Shanley] according to Camarillo the caretaker, determined that the kitchen, stable, and carriage house were original to the property. The two rear rooms of the house, one of which connects with the kitchen, were probably built between 1910 and 1920 by the Treviños. When the house was being restored the brick walk which originally connected the central hall of the house with the kitchen was found.

Portions of the carriage house at the rear of the property on the alley and 13th Street were adapted as a three-bedroom apartment for the caretaker and family; major exterior alterations consisted of filling in arcuated openings. Other alterations noted by Mrs. Grace Edman, member of the Cameron County Survey Committee, relative to numbered photographs being transmitted to the Texas State Historical Survey Committee in her letter of April 29, 1960, appear in the Supplemental Material.

B. Historical Events and Persons Associated with the Building:

Charles Stillman, who laid out the town of Brownsville in 1848, is said to have lived in this house although he never owned it. The house was apparently rented for a number of years in the nineteenth century. Twin Cities of the Border, published in 1893, has a photo-engraving of the house, and states that it was the residence of Thomas Carson who was an agent for the Stillman interests. A brochure of souvenir photographs of Brownsville which had belonged to Carson bears a note in his hand stating "The Stillman residence where I live now." This is on display in the Stillman House. It is stated in Charles Stillman, which was the result of extensive research by M. Minot Pitman and Mrs. W. Lovering Holman, both Fellows of the American Society of genealogists, that James Jewett Stillman was born in the house on June 9, 1850, and that he and Isabel Goodrich Stillman were baptized in the house on June 2, 1853, by the rector of the Church of the Advent.

Charles Stillman was born in Wethersfield, Connecticut, on November 4, 1810. In February 1828 he and his father, Francis Stillman, came to Matamoros, Mexico, across the Rio Grande River from what is now Brownsville, to establish a mercantile business. Charles Stillman could see the potential of the land across the river from Matamoros so he bought the title to the Original Townsite of Brownsville as well as the site of Fort Brown from the heirs of Jose Salvador de la Garza, the original Spanish grantee. In 1848 Stillman and Samuel Belden commissioned George Lyons, the deputy surveyor of Nueces County in which the land was then located, to survey and lay out the Original Townsite of 4,676 acres. Most of the main streets were named for presidents of the United States; St. Francis Street was named for Stillman's father, Elizabeth Street for his fiancée, and St. Charles Street for himself. At the time the town was laid out, Stillman deeded the sites on which the present Annie C. Putegnat School, Washington Park, and City Hall are located, to the city of Brownsville. In January 1849, Charles Stillman and Co. began a shipping business on the Rio Grande using ships which had supplied Zachary Taylor's army.

He was an original partner in Kenedy & Co., which consisted of Mifflin Kenedy, Richard King, Charles Stillman, and James O'Donnell, and which had a monopoly on the shipping trade on the Rio Grande for over twenty years. Stillman returned to New York in 1866 and died there on December 18, 1875. (Charles Stillman, and Webb, Vol. II page 673.)

Charles Stillman married Elizabeth Pamela Goodrich, eighteen years his junior, in Wethersfield, Connecticut, on August 17, 1849. Elizabeth apparently came down to Brownsville but left in 1853 to move her children to a more healthful climate, eventually settling in New York. She never returned to Brownsville and until 1866 would see Charles only when he would return to New York for the summer. They had six children, James Jewett, Isabel (christened Elizabeth) Goodrich, Clara Francis, Charles Jr., Bessie Gran, and Edith Raymond. Chauncey Devereux Stillman, who donated the Stillman House to the Brownsville Historical Association, is James Stillman's grandson.

Abelardo Treviño Told Kino Camarillo, the caretaker, that both he and his father Manuel Treviño served as Mexican consuls in Brownsville. Manuel Treviño was consul in the 1860s and Abelardo Treviño was consul in the 1920s. Manuel apparently never lived in the house although his son Abelardo occupied it until his death in 1955. From approximately 1945 to 1956 Kino Camarillo had a second-hand clothing store and shoe repair shop in the carriage house at the rear of the property.

C. Bibliography:

1. Primary and unpublished sources:

Survey material prepared by Sandra Merrill for the Brownsville Architectural Historical Survey and Preservation Plan on file in the Office of City Planning, Brownsville, Texas.

Measured drawings of the Stillman House, University of Texas School of Architecture Archives, Austin, Texas. These drawings were done in the early 1970s by a student of D. B. Alexander.

Interview with Kino Camarillo, Stillman House, Brownsville, Texas, on July 26, 1977. Kino Camarillo is not only caretaker of the Stillman House but has lived on the property for the past thirty-two years. He furnished information about alterations to the house and about the Treviño family.

2. Secondary sources:

Chatfield, Lieut. W. H., U. S. Army. The Twin Cities of the Border. Originally published in New Orleans, Printed by E. P. Brandao, 1893. Reprinted in 1959 by the Harbert Davenport Memorial Fund, the Brownsville Historical Association, and the Lower Rio Grande Valley Historical Society. (1892 photo-engraving of Stillman House and biographical sketch of Thomas Carson.)

Charles Stillman: 1810-1875. New York: Printed for Chauncey Devereux Stillman, 1956. [Copy in HABS Library.]

Stillman House. Brochure published by the Brownsville Historical Association, Brownsville, Texas. (Out of print.)

Webb, Walter Prescott, Editor-in-chief. The Handbook of Texas.
Austin: The Texas State Historical Association, 1952.

D. Supplemental Material:

Information on the restoration of Stillman House, obtained from the Texas Medallion files of the Texas Historical Commission, P. O. Box 12276, Austin, Texas. Photographs of the house being restored can also be found in these files.

Letter from Mrs. Grace Edman, Member of the Cameron County Survey Committee to Mr. George W. Hill, Executive Director, Texas State Historical Survey Committee, 112 West 14th Street, Austin, Texas, reads as follows concerning restoration photographs:

No. 1--The Stillman House in process of careful restoration as it was in 1850, as far as can be discovered . . . Study and Planning at every stage has gone on both in New York City and Brownsville.

No. 2--The original brick columns were plastered and are now replastered. New flooring for the porch, to be like the original, was bought in Houston and milled there by specifications, as was any other lumber needed.

No. 3--A little of the lumber bracing is changed. This picture and No. 2 show the substantial foundation of brick, all walls being thick and a continuation of the foundation subdivisions.

No. 4--The patio can be seen through the main hallway, where is shown air conditioning being installed before replacing the ceiling. A heat-pump provides cooling and heating for modern needs.

No. 6--Supplementary bracing was put in (and left there) as shown to assure adequate support for a new slate roof. The roofing was shipped in from Vermont, the cost being less than the freight.

No. 7--Side garden as it was on acquisition: shrubbery, cistern, stable, carriage house and storage rooms, yet to be restored. On the opposite side of the wing of the main house (right) is another cistern in the brick inlaid patio.

No. 8--Part of the same side yard, which will be modified by the Garden Committee, to create a semi-formal garden of the 1850s. Toward the back, in front of the carriage house, will be a shaded area. Members will formalize the patio also.

Much thought has gone into the redecorating of the interior walls, under supervision of an expert on early American homes and furnish-

ings available in the 50s and 60s. You may also remember the hexagon bricks on the front walk and in the kitchen, which do not show up in any pictures. The news item was in the Herald the 27th. Mrs. Bacon was called in when Mrs. Powel became ill. The latter is the specialist Mr. Stillman sent down last year. The two of them talked to Mrs. Bacon by telephone; she had been recommended.

It was Lydia Powel, then Keeper of the American Wing in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (later the Department of American Decorative Arts) who had been called in to advise by Chauncey D. Stillman. Mrs. Powel drew up the plans for furnishing the house after spending some time in Brownsville inspecting the older residences. Shortly before the house was finished, Mrs. Powel had a heart attack. The work was then carried on by the Brownsville firm of Helen Bacon, Interiors, using Mrs. Powel's plan. All furnishings came from the Stillman family. Further information on the Stillman House Restoration appears in the Texas Medallion files of the Texas Historical Commission.

Prepared by: Betty Bird
University of Virginia
Project Historian
1977

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: This Greek Revival brick structure, with center hall plan, is one of the earliest homes of this type built in Brownsville.
2. Condition of fabric: Good.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The L-shaped is one story in height with a five-bay front. Measurements were not made.
2. Foundation: Brick, with metal grille foundation vents.
3. Wall construction, finish, color: Pink brick laid in common bond.
4. Structural system, framing: Brick load-bearing walls with wood framed floor and roof construction.

5. Porches, stoops, bulkheads, etc.: A porch across the entire front facade has a flat roof supported by four large round plastered columns, painted white. The columns have brick pedestals at the porch floor level, with the two at the center extended and two brick steps between them. The floor is of wood, plastered, with molded trim. The simple wood porch balustrade, painted white—the bottom rail raised a few inches from the floor, the balusters square-sided with simple wood rail—extends between columns across the front, and from the corner columns to the walls.

There is a small extension of the roof at the two side doors of the kitchen forming a stoop with no floor but the brick paving of the courtyard beyond.

6. Chimneys: There is a brick chimney in the top of each gable end wall at the front side of the roof ridge. The chimney is on the wall parapet, and flush with the face of the wall, and extends up to a projecting brick cap. There is an arched brick chimney hood.

There is a brick chimney on the end wall of the kitchen that is flush with the outside face of the wall also. The chimney extends up to a cap of four stepped brick courses.

7. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: The main entrance is on the center axis of the front facade. The wood panel door is flanked by a sidelight each side. The sidelight has a lower wood panel topped by a twenty-one-light (various sized) sash. There is a heavy jamb between the door sidelight with a simple wood molding cap, supporting a deep lintel, above which is a twenty-one-light transom, also of various sized lights. The door has wood surrounds, wood sill and threshold, and the interior trim has plinth blocks. There is a plastered projecting lintel over the opening.

There is a door to the kitchen opposite each other on the southeast and northwest walls. The vertical wooden plank doors have wood surrounds and brick sills. There is a double opening at the northeast end of the center hall opening to the patio. It has a pair of wood panel doors with a glass top panel which has adjustable wooden louvres over it on the inner side. There is an eighteen-light transom above, and wood surrounds. The opening leaf has a large wrought-iron lockset with a brass knob and a wrought-iron top and bottom door bolt.

- b. Windows and shutters: Wooden, single-hung windows have six-over-six-light sashes and wooden adjustable louver shutters, painted dark green. There are wooden sills and flat arch lintels. Lintels and sills on the front windows are plastered and painted white and project from the walls.

8. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: The gabled roof has slate shingles. The gable ends at the front of the roof rise into a sloping brick parapet with projecting brick cap. The rear wall of the kitchen has a horizontal, stepped brick parapet. There is a flat roof on the rear of the building.
- b. Cornice, eaves: The wood cornice is boxed and painted white. There are metal downspouts.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plan: The entrance in the center opens into the center hall. On the right side of the hall are the parlor, dining room, and study, one behind the other in succeeding order. The parlor has two windows on the southwest wall and one on either side of the fireplace on the southeast wall. There is a door in the center of the northeast wall leading into the dining room. The projecting fireplace with projecting flue above is plastered and has a simple wooden mantelpiece. There is a concrete hearth.

The small dining room has a window on the southeast, a door in the center of the northeast wall (to the study) and a door in the center of the northwest wall (to the hall). The study has a window on each of the northeast and southeast walls, in the center, and a door to the hall in the center of the northwest wall. The hallway is wider at the second bay towards the rear.

At the left side of the center hall on the front is the west bedroom. It is like the parlor with the exception that it has no door on the northeast wall. Beyond the bedroom is a small room used for a museum display room, with a window on the northwest wall, a door on the northeast wall to a larger display room, and a door on the southeast opening into the center hall. The large display room also has a door on the southeast leading into the center hall. There is a window on the southeast wall and two on the northwest wall. A door in the center of the northeast wall leads down two brick steps into the kitchen. The kitchen has opposing doors on each of the northwest and southeast walls, leading to the exterior. There is a window on each side of the door on the southeast wall. Across the northeast end is a large brick fireplace with a raised hearth for cooking.

2. Flooring: Flooring is of wide wooden boards. The flooring in the center hall changes direction, running at right angles to the flooring in all the other rooms except the large display room. Flooring in the kitchen is of hexagonal clay tile.

3. Walls and ceiling finish: Plaster walls and ceilings, painted, appear throughout. Some of the rooms have picture molding on the wall, forming a cornice around the room. The front bedroom has a wallpaper frieze. There are simple round molded plaster ceiling medallions in some rooms.
4. Doorways and doors: Mortise-and-tenon wood panel doors with wood surround, plinth blocks, and brass knobs occur throughout.
5. Mechanical equipment:
 - a. Heating: Modern heating and air-conditioning equipment used.
 - b. Lighting: In the center hall are three hanging-light fixtures in series. The first has a clear-glass, etched, sphere with a glass shield above it. The second one is hexagonal, a black metal frame with alternating etched glass panels of red, blue, and white. There is a clear glass shield above this fixture. At the rear of the center hall, the third is a hanging black metal hexagonal fixture with frosted, etched-glass panels, and a clear glass bottom.

In the parlor is a black and white hanging light fixture with three pear-shaped weights suspended by a black chain from small pulleys. There is a three-branched light fixture with frosted etched-glass shades, a vase-like center and a plate bottom. All is decorated with black and white.

The light fixture in the dining room has a suspended, frosted shade, decorated with painted florals, hanging from a chain at the ceiling in a gold-leaf medallion. From the medallion three brass rods support the shade.

The study has a five-branched brass candelabrum with five small engaged brass spheres on a chain hanging from the ceiling. Lighting fixtures in the display room have modern fluorescent fixtures.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The house faces southwest on the east corner at the intersection of East 13th and East Washington streets. It is surrounded by commercial properties. There is an iron fence on top of a brick sill extending across the front of the property and part way around each side. The iron fence is intercepted by a brick wall with sloping cap at the sides. There is a brick walk along the southeast edge of the house and extending around the perimeter of the house. At the northwest side is a garden with numerous large trees and plantings. There diagonally laid brick walks leading to and around an octagonal brick planter. There are brick benches around the outer edge of the octagonal walk. In the garden near the kitchen is a raised brick cistern with two large concrete posts on top pierced near the top by a pulley bar.

On the southeast side of the kitchen is a brick-paved patio. There is a raised brick well with a sloped brick paving around it. There is some planting in the patio. At the rear of the patio is a high brick wall with a large-arched double opening leading to the alley. There is a brick buttress in the patio on each side of the opening.

2. Outbuildings:

- a. Toilets: There is a small brick building, with a flat roof, housing toilet facilities, located in the patio. The building has a concrete floor and a wood panel door leading into each of the toilets.
- b. Carriage house: The brick carriage house is at the rear of the site at the northwest side of the house. It has three large arched openings on the southwest. The one in the center has iron gates and grilles over it. The one on the right has the lower part filled in with brick and iron grill-work in the top part. The left side has been filled in with brick and a door leading into living quarters. The living quarters were inaccessible for recording. The carriage house has a brick floor, brick walls, and exposed wood joists and ceiling. The joists have a bead on each side. The shed roof has an open cornice and built-up asphalt roofing. There is a large double opening on the rear to the alley. A high window on the alley side has iron bars and wood shutters.

Prepared by: John P. White
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1977

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

At the suggestion of a national preservation consultant, Ellen Beasley, this project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) and the Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation, in cooperation with the Brownsville Historical Association and the Brownsville City Planning Department. Under the direction of John Poppeliers, Chief of HABS, the project was completed during the summer of 1977 at the Historic American Buildings Survey field office, Brownsville, Texas, by John P. White (Associate Professor, Texas Technological University) Project Supervisor; Betty Bird (University of Virginia) Project Historian; and Student Assistant Architects Scott Deneroff (University of Maryland), Susan Dornbusch (University of Virginia), Matthew Lowry (University of Pennsylvania), Eduardo Luaces (University of Florida), and Alan Willig (the City College of the City University of New York). Special assistance and support were provided to the HABS team by Mrs. Mary Simmons, Mrs. Sally Fleming, Miss Theresa Champion, and Mr. Calvin Walker of the Brownsville Historical Association; and by Mr. Mario Moreno, Mr. Richard Waldman, Mrs. Graciela Salinas, and Mr. Larry Brown of the Brownsville City Planning Department. Archival photographs of the project were made in February 1979 by Bill Engdahl, of Hedrich-Blessing, Chicago, Illinois. Editing and final preparation of the documentation was carried out in the HABS Washington office by Lucy Pope Wheeler of the HABS professional staff.